

**Experience Africa with me
July 2005
by Michelle Stark, Founder Matanya's Hope**

My name is Michelle Stark. When I went to Kenya for the first time in 2005, I worked 3 jobs, 7 days a week to make ends meet for myself and my 18 year old son. When my parents approached me 2 years before that to take my son and me with them on a trip to Africa, my heart was filled with the kind of joy I hadn't known for quite some time. My father wanted his family to be there together with him, to help celebrate his 70th birthday. Africa had been their destination of choice for years and still is. They go often. I heard stories from their friends who'd gone with them and seen their photographs which filled my eyes with wonder! Now, unbelievably, I would finally experience this first hand!

...our plane approached the runway - a long pathway of worn earthen trail amidst a field of frolicking wildebeests. The way they ran around was almost rehearsed - as if they were laughing at us - playing their game; I felt like I was landing in the middle of a movie set but it was so real I had to pinch myself! My eyes brimmed with such happy tears I actually hid my face - this was so private - I didn't want to explain. I was here with my family - my father's dream became a part of my personal reality - and I just knew that this was going to be the kind of experience that one doesn't forget.

We awoke early every day for game drives on which we encountered lions, cheetahs, monkeys, giraffe, elephants, zebras, wildebeests, wart hogs, chimpanzees, cape buffalo, hyenas, vultures, crocodiles, hippos and much more! The sights were not to be believed! - The air was delightfully fresh and clean! The sky seemed to span forever!

We saw women hard at work, primitively spinning lambs wool and weaving it into magnificent garments. The vivid colors of their textiles came from their own unique use of flowers, leaves and even speckled beetle type bugs. Often, the workers' feet were bare - their pockets empty, but their hearts were full of a kind of joy that made me happy to be near them. While they apparently had no material wealth, they had a far greater intangible richness represented by a quality of life that seems to have disappeared from most of our world.

One day, we went to visit a school near the Sweetwater's Game Reserve. The children were clothed in tattered uniforms. Their gray cardigans were often pilled and marked with tears and runs. The girls wore light gray cotton skirts that came well below their knees and the boys wore darker shorts or pants. The clothing bore all of the signs of being handed down from student to student over the years. It was marked by the tell tale signs of wear and of Africa 's earthen floor. As the children sat on the ground of the great outdoors (their auditorium) at attention, with their hands in the air (showing their readiness to meet us), I could count the lucky few who owned a pair of shoes. Money surely lacked here, but even at this sight, I was not capable of understanding the

reality of the harshness of their lives.

Our group of approximately 25 American tourists split up into smaller units and we were lead by the children and their teachers to different classrooms. Fragmented boards were nailed together over a frame of sorts and combined with cinder blocks to create a room with shelter. Pieces of corrugated tin stretched over the long building providing a makeshift roof. **There was no running water. There was no electricity.** Each classroom had a few windows - and the spaces between the boards where the sun was beckoned in provided light for their studies. The desks were made up of 2 X 4's with a writing surface the width of one board, barely enough to support a book. The benches, picnic table style, were nailed to the desk; each supported one student who had to squeeze in, in order to sit down.

It was here that my world was about to change. The teacher from "our classroom" approached me with Mercy Nyawira Chege's composition book, a student from that class. The writings she showed me were impeccable. The teacher explained that Mercy was one of the best students in the school. It was clear to me that the child could write. Then, she sadly shared that this child would not get to go on passed the 5th grade as her parents could not afford \$10 for her required uniform this coming year. My heart sank. \$10? No school? I wouldn't accept this scenario for such a bright girl; she WANTS to LEARN!

We were informed that schooling for these children is sponsored by the government until the completion of the 8th grade. At that time the children's families are required to pay the \$350.00 annual tuition per child plus fees for supplies and uniform in order for the children to continue into high school. (today, the fees are a minimum of \$500 per child making it even more difficult for a family – who's income never raised along with the cost of living – to afford to send their children to school.) The harsh reality is that most families could not afford even this meager stipend. Until Matanya's Hope, all Matanya Primary School students education was effectively terminated after the eighth grade, condemning each of them to a life of poverty. They would be destined to languish in their families small draught stricken fields (if indeed their families are lucky enough to farm their own land), which did not provide ample income for those already working the soil - and they would continue trying to raise crops for nourishment and possible financial sustenance. The orphans would have to fend for themselves, making even the poor yielding farm work on drought stricken land seem a luxury.

As the visitors left their classrooms, I made my way into the office (another small, dusty makeshift room in the long hall like structure of classes) where I spoke with the head teacher of the day. Through trembling lips, I was able to fight back my tears enough to tell her that this 5th grade child would go to school! I would pay for her. I would pay whatever fees she needed. I recall someone saying "it is ok Michelle". At this point, my tears broke. "NO! It isn't ok! It is NOT ok!" Surrounded now by my parents, my sister and her husband and other traveling companions, 4 families agreed to sponsor one child each. I asked the head teacher to bring in 3 additional children who excelled

scholastically but who were struggling to meet their financial obligations to the school. "Three?", she asked? "How am I to do that? They are all poor. They are all hungry!" Even with this, I did not understand the magnitude of her words.

Mrs. Njambi Mugo, the teacher, responded by bringing in 3 students to meet us along with the original child I had sponsored. Peter Wacira (who had just lost his father), Peris Wachera (first in the school since kindergarten) and Christine Muthoni (found wandering and taken in by a good Samaritan) became the first students to receive funds from what would become Matanya's Hope.

As the saying states, "a mind is a terrible thing to waste". We took it upon ourselves at that moment to try and make a difference in these children's lives. We collectively sponsored the education for four children on the spot. At the same time we formed a bond with these four children and have kept in contact with them since last July, marking their success each new day and giving them real hope for the future.

We did not realize it then, but we were on to something wonderful!

Following this early success, and upon our return to the United States, I received a letter from Mrs. Mugo (the teacher who befriended us on our visit to the school). She said she had a set of twins who wanted to become a part of our program as well as a young girl who had been stricken with polio. This girl would need to attend a boarding school and the anticipated costs for her were approximately \$750.00 a year. She asked if I would be able to undertake this as well. I was paralyzed with both emotion and fear. How in the world was I going to come up with this money? The thought kept me awake at night because I knew I was not personally in a position to support these needs. I could not close my eyes to these children and I realized that I would have to ask others to help me in this endeavor.

I was driven to improve upon what we started in Kenya. By communicating with Mrs. Mugo (our contact at Matanya Primary School) and with people who wanted to help, we created the Matanya's Hope Charity Organization, designed to help provide continuing education for the children of Matanya, Nanyuki, the Masai Mara and surrounding areas of Kenya. In addition we are working with other African Liaisons to create a distribution and learning center in Kenya which will provide the families with primitive drip irrigation systems and instructional support on how to assemble and use them to benefit crop production on their small farms. This will enable them to radically improve the quality and quantity of the crops they grow which will positively impact their lives and economies. The inventor of this inexpensive system was responsible for feeding over 40,000 children in Africa last summer by teaching these simple methods to the area families.

Matanya's Hope has also grown dramatically over the past four years and we now are able to sponsor a total of 153 students who will continue their education beyond the eighth year. In addition, we are proud of our first college graduate, John Otinga who has

beat the odds through education. He is now working in his dream career as a chef in Dubai. Other students have successfully graduated from vocational schools and are now employed – all because of the support sponsors have given to Matanya's Hope. Where there was once no hope at all, there is now hope and excitement for these children. With a continued education, they are getting closer everyday to becoming productive individuals in a land where poverty is now the norm.

We have developed many funds to assist the children and their families. Some are listed below. SEE OUR ALTERNATIVE GIVING PAGE FOR A FULL CATALOGUE OF PROGRAMS AND GIFTS AVAILABLE. (this – above - can be a hyper link)

- "Let There Be Light" supplies a lantern and a full year of paraffin to students who otherwise would have no source of light once the sun sets.
- Rainwater Storage Tanks: Residents of most areas of Rural Kenya must endure 4 months or more of severe drought every year. A rainwater storage tank collects water from the rooftops during the rainy season and stores it safely until needed.
- Chicken / Goat / Cow Program: Being hungry is not easy, yet sometimes our children and their families go for two to four days without food. One healthy chicken can provide an entire family with essential nutrients. Goats and cows provide milk as well as meat to a family that once struggled for even a sip of dirty water.

Yes, there is much to be done, but in almost 4 years, much has already changed. Children who were once destined to work in the fields and live in semi-starvation are now in high school boarding schools and even in college / university receiving an education. Children who walked miles to school barefoot and cold are now receiving clothing and shoes to help them overcome these hardships. Hungry children are now being fed, and the list goes on and on.

Matanya's Hope is proud to be changing the world, one child at a time. Whoever said changing the world is impossible? It is not easy. But, only ignoring the problem makes our plight impossible! We need your help - these children are **counting on us**. Help us get them what is free in our country and let them learn. Please help us lead these children to the fruits of their education - something they have feared to dream about – but has now become possible through Matanya's Hope. Make it possible for the children to help themselves through the power of their minds.

This has been a wonderful, exciting and rewarding involvement. Matanya's Hope is a fully accredited 501-(C)(3) approved charity. Your donations are tax deductible to the extent of the law. Let these beautiful minds flourish! We invite you to join us in this wonderful endeavor. All of the children sponsored communicate directly with their individual sponsors forging a new chain of strength into the future. You may see yourself as the rescuer or helper, but wait to see just how much you too will learn in this marvelous exchange! We hope you will consider joining us in this exciting venture.

We welcome your support and involvement. One hundred percent of all sponsorship dollars go to the children sponsored. One hundred percent of all other program donations go directly to the program intended by the donor. All of the Matanya's Hope US staff work on a volunteer basis only and each board member has sponsored at least one child themselves.